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The Ecocritical Paradox and Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Proxy Poetry

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While geologists continue to debate whether the Holocene epoch will be formally replaced by what has been dubbed the “Anthropocene,” scholars in the humanities have heartily embraced the term. The 2012 Annual Meeting of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI) took as its theme, “Anthropocene Humanities.” Other platforms have brought human-nature relationships to the fore, including a recent issue of SubStance entitled Globing the Earth: The New Eco-logics of Nature. The review takes its title from Ranjan Ghosh’s article of the same name, in which Ghosh explores how developing conceptions of nature will continue to shift from the anthropocentric to the biocentric. At its extreme, Ghosh’s article claims that ecological sensibilities will become so dominant that a sort of “green racism” will develop, denying “access to people who would like to migrate from green-impure territories” to “green pure” territories (9). Yet Ghosh’s article is typical of concerns that are prevalent in the humanities today, questioning how humankind defines its relationship with nature and investigating to what extent ecocentric and biocentric voices can be heard over anthropocentric voices. While scholars like Ghosh focus on the theoretical basis of such implications, others have exerted efforts to reveal how literature can provide an insight into a historical conception of nature, thus informing
contemporary ideas. Some of these ecocritics have sought to show how the literature of the nineteenth century contains the early shadows of ecological and biocentric thought.

The debate as to whether the Victorian Era can be a site for ecocritical research is over. Scores of scholars have published numerous pages exploring this question. However, the debate remains as to how the ecological understandings of that era will inform contemporary society’s relation to the natural world. Some have implied that ecocriticism’s goal has been to “re-write the canon” (Parham 156), a goal that has been unsuccessfully sought and has resulted only in the creation of a canon of its own. But I submit that the value of ecocriticism lies not in its attempts at re-writing the canon, but in its successes in reevaluating the canon, to approach the canon through an environmentally minded and scientifically informed worldview. The next stage in Victorian ecocritical research is not the search for the “green Victorian”; rather, the next stage will be finding how the era provides ample room for ecocritics to show that their unique perspective augments scholarly understanding of the texts of the age. Beyond addressing these foundational concepts, this paper explores the ways Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Binsey Poplars” informs a theoretical and ethical paradox not often addressed within ecocritical circles: how to balance voices of nature and voices for nature.

Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Binsey Poplars” provides a textual site at which ecocritical insights inform a deeper understanding of the poem. By calling upon the interdisciplinarity of ecocriticism (with its implementation of scientific principles), this paper demonstrates that Hopkins’s poetic innovations and religiosity are only parts of a whole, a whole that includes a distinctly biocentric awareness. The paradox at the heart of ecocriticism lies in the texts that ecocritics study and the relationship in those texts between speaker and subject matter: Can poets (who are always only human subjects) offer voices of nature (which, by conventional definitions, is not human)? Many efforts have been made to demonstrate that nature writing can properly convey voices of nature (consider the poetic projects of Robinson Jeffers, W. S. Merwin, and others), while careful examination allows only that texts demonstrate voices for nature. Various ecocritical and theoretical critics have developed ideas regarding humanity’s relation to the natural world. The framework created by these writers allows for a cohesive discussion about voices for nature, voices of nature, and the ultimate benefits of acknowledging the proxy element of nature
writing. Hopkins himself, in lamenting the loss of the titular trees, reveals that his is indisputably a voice for nature, not a voice of nature.

What I have dubbed the “ecocritical paradox” develops from recognizing that ecocritical theory differs dramatically from its counterparts. Feminist theory, postcolonial theory, Marxist theory, and queer theory all, at a certain level, share a common goal: integrating into the literary discussion texts that represent voices for the previously marginalized and texts that represent voices of those groups. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, cannot share this same goal. Never will the voice of nature be heard in our language except through the channel of human writers who are, unequivocally, only voices for nature. Calling this phenomenon a “paradox” relies on the insistence that ecocriticism has attempted to establish itself among other literary theories while lacking a crucial element common to its fellow theories. This observation is not new, but it is somewhat under-acknowledged and underdeveloped. Lawrence Buell, sometimes hailed as the father of modern ecocriticism, wrote, “But an obvious difference between ecocriticism and emergent discourses on behalf of silenced or disempowered social groups was in the kind of identitarian claims that could plausibly be made in that context. One can speak as an environmentalist, . . . but self-evidently no human can speak as the environment, as nature, as a nonhuman animal” (7). Central to the ecocritical paradox is the construct of the modern concept of nature, outlined most thoroughly by William Cronon in the nineties.

Conceiving humans as part of “nature”—and hence entitling them with the power to be voices of nature—is a questionable prospect; our very view of nature is a human-made construct, and there are times when the “interests of people are not necessarily identical to those of every other creature or of the earth itself” and vice versa (Cronon 22). Even in Ghosh’s biocentric article, he states that “[n]ature is more than what takes place without the voluntary and intentional agency of man; nature is beyond the human will; it is also functionally multivalent, historically complex, and an ideological and paradoxical concept” (3–4).

To this same end, C. S. Lewis wrote regarding the love of nature. He takes as his subject matter those people for whom “[i]t is the ‘moods’ or the ‘spirit’ [of nature] that matter” and for whom Wordsworth is considered the standard bearer (18). Lewis, however, criticizes the extremes of Wordsworth’s writings, saying that Wordsworth said some “silly things” (18). He explains that if one seeks to be taught by nature, then one might learn a lesson of which
Wordsworth would have disapproved: “It might be that of ruthless competition” (19). Lewis concludes, “If you take nature as a teacher she will teach you exactly the lessons you had already decided to learn” (19). Thus, literarily speaking, nature is not a site of inherent interpretation and exegesis, but rather a site of anthropocentric reflection and eisegesis. The value of studying the ecological inklings of Romantic or Victorian writers does little to speak to the voice of nature and does much to speak to the voice for nature, the voice of humans in the act of observing nature or annexing it into their own identity.

When Cronon explored the construct of contemporary perceptions of nature, he focused mainly on the idea of “wilderness” and its juxtaposition against the city. Cronon argued that, over time, people have shifted their perception of wilderness from a site of woe to a place of illumination. In the religious focus of his essay, he says that “Satan’s home had become God’s own temple” (9). This change in perception resulted from the growth of cities and societies. Cronon argued that “[n]o matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us” (16). Thus, the city and the natural world have been created in opposition to one another.

Such opposition is clear in countless poems throughout the Romantic era and even earlier. The Scottish poet Allan Ramsay wrote “An Epistle Written from Mavisbank, March 1748, to a Friend in Edinburgh,” in which he advises his friend “out of pity / To leave the chattering, stinking city; / Where pride, and shallowness, take place / Of plain integrity, and grace” (ll. 7–10). Ramsay imbues the countryside with “plain integrity” and “grace” while attributing negative traits to the city. Like Ramsay, Coleridge would later express similar sentiments in his poem, “This Lime Tree Bower My Prison.” The vistas that his wandering friends encounter are explored within the limits of Coleridge’s own mind and so too are the conclusions he reaches about their feelings on such a scene. The poem does not reveal Charles Lamb’s reaction to nature but rather presents only Coleridge’s projection of his own sentiments onto Charles’s thought. Such a projection is at the core of nature writing. Cronon argued that the entire concept of nature is a human construct; thus, thinking of nature as those places most free from human civilization is incongruous. Nature “is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made” (7).

The problem arises that any text seeking to speak for nature becomes a reflection on the writer’s worldview. The writer, in speaking for nature, becomes
nature’s proxy, a responsibility that modern ecologists would happily defend. Because the voice of nature itself will never be heard, the voices of informed writers must speak on nature’s behalf. Proxy, in the sense I use, has less to do with one voice standing in for another and more to do with one voice standing in for the perceived rights of an otherwise voiceless group. In this way, the city (a physical human construct) can find a balance with nature (itself a construct of human perception). Again, Hopkins’s poetry can demonstrate how one writer embraces the responsibility of proxy writing, though he may not have been aware of this perspective. His presence within the poem—if only through voice rather than direct reference—is not secondary, but rather crucial.

As contemporary society’s perceptions of nature are a construct, and as the messages that writers glean from nature in fact represent reciprocal confirmations, students of the environmental writings of the nineteenth century must acknowledge that the benefit of reading such texts is less to re-write the literary canon and more to reevaluate what canonical texts have to say. In this reevaluation, ecocritics will cease the search for the most “correct” voice of nature and instead demonstrate how literary texts can inform both the construct of nature and humans’ relationship to nature. Hopkins’s poetry has been the object of much ecocritical interpretation in recent years. But before I explore how “Binsey Poplars” speaks to the act of such proxy writing, I will, following the tradition of other ecocritics writing about the nineteenth century, provide a cursory reflection on how scholars have established the “greenness” of the Victorian Age.

The critic to have established the “greenness” of the age most comprehensively and concisely was John Parham. In 2002, Parham edited and published *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, contributing his own chapter to the collection: “Was there a Victorian Ecology?” Scholars now answer that question with a resounding yes. The poetry and prose of the era has been explored through the ecological and ecocritical lens many times since Parham himself asserted that an ecological awareness was alive and well in the Victorian Era. He cites David Pepper as having argued that the Romantic writers praised and admired nature to better the “isolated individual” (qtd. in Parham 159), whereas Parham claims that the Victorians took up the standard of reform and became advocates for the world outside human creation by arming themselves with the advances of science and technology to better understand nature. By defining ecology as pursuing the preservation and conservation of natural places through legislation and action, scholars have more clearly shown
that the Victorian era stands as the true beginning of contemporary ecological thought.

The same energies that resulted in various reform bills and acts of parliament to defend workers, women, and children were used to defend nature. “Natural history societies came and went, and only in the late nineteenth century did a conservation movement emerge,” writes Christopher Rootes (34). The Selborne Society for the Protection of Birds, Plants, and Pleasant Places was established in 1885. Its aims are evident in the name of the organization, but some of its famous patrons are not: Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, and John Ruskin were among some of the members of this society, revealing the link between the literary community and the nascent ecological movement (“Science”). The mere existence of such a society may surprise some, let alone the involvement of such eminent literary figures. Other groups included The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (the predecessor to the RSPCA), The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty, and the Commons Preservation Society. The latter organization boasted John Stuart Mill as an early member (“History”). Clearly, Victorian society invested heavily in the welfare of the natural world.

The literature, too, was fraught with environmental understanding and ecological leanings. Scholars have taken Parham’s question to heart, dedicating many pages to revealing the ecological underpinnings of various Victorian writers. As one example, Christopher Hamlin explores the biocentricity of Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke*. Although the novel conventionally presents familiar tropes regarding the Chartist movement, poverty, and class struggles, Hamlin contends that Kingsley’s own scientific understanding informs a different reading of the novel. Kingsley “imagin[es] the self as a biotic being” that is deeply linked with the surrounding natural world (Hamlin 255). Hamlin explores how the dream sequences within the novel develop an animalistic connection to nature. In “opposite trajectories,” he explains, “Darwin animalized the human, while Kingsley humanized the animal” (260). For Kingsley, the world could be seen as biocentric as opposed to anthropocentric, focused on a biotic community instead of on human beings. Other realist novelists have been brought into this environmental conversation in somewhat lateral ways. Joseph Carroll submits that Dickens’s portrayal of London presents a certain “wild” scene akin to Conrad’s Africa or Kipling’s India (305–7). Such a wilderness allows the reader to draw connections between social stratifications and theories, including Darwinian evolution or the laws of thermodynamics. These
laws have also been applied to readings of *Jane Eyre* (Gold 222). Yet all of these explorations pale when compared to the depth of scholarship that has been devoted to Hopkins’s conceptions of the natural world, his understanding of thermodynamics, and his own sense of ecology.

“Binsey Poplars” has already been explored through the lens of ecocriticism in a 2004 issue of *Victorian Poetry*. Brian Day writes with the intent to define Hopkins’s “spiritual ecology” as evidenced in the poem. He begins his article by mentioning Parham’s question as to whether there was a Victorian ecology and states that in the midst of the many discussions on Hopkins, “no significant attempt at an ecocritical reading of Hopkins has appeared since a pair of essays by Jerome Bump in the early 1970s” (181). This claim, however, overlooks some of the scientific/ecocritical investigations of Hopkins, particularly Jude Nixon’s “‘Death Blots Black Out’: Thermodynamics and the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins,” as well as Parham’s own “Green Man Hopkins: Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Ecological Criticism.” Day establishes his own argument by focusing on specific lines within the poem itself. He explores Hopkins’s theological understanding of what “selving” means and how his concept of creating a self extends beyond the human to the nonhuman, which Day demonstrates through his own reading of the poem. “Hopkins’s argument,” writes Day, “undermines the traditional humanist position that emphasizes the differences between human selfhood and nature’s otherness as signified by the exclusive human possession of soul, mind, and consciousness” (183).

For Day, the impact of Hopkins’s reflection on the felling of the titular trees is Hopkins’s attempts to understand the inner essence of the trees; using Hopkins’s own terms, this means that he implements “instressing” to understand the “inscape” of the trees. Day asserts that in this poem, Hopkins has deliberately conflated the trees with Christ. As Christ exists in his corporeal form as well as in the Eucharist, the tree has its own “thingness” that is “inseparable from its inscape” (187). Day then begins to present a familiar reading when he says that “[i]nscape therefore does not move Hopkins away from the thing into the realm of transcendental signifiers, but keeps him looking at the thing itself even as he perceives Christ’s sacrifice” (188). Day thus claims that Hopkins’s focus is continuously on the trees, but this looking at the “thing itself” is accomplished only through Hopkins; never have the trees spoken nor will the trees speak on their own behalf, revealing the utter otherness of nature. Day states that “[a]nything becomes sacred when we take the trouble to instress its inscape” (189), but this is the same pitfall against which Lewis warned when he explained that
nature will teach the watcher the lessons he or she has already determined. Day has fallen victim to the same assumption under which Ricks Carson explains how this poem reveals a sympathy that has its roots in romanticism, but here nature is an even more intimate companion than it is in poems such as Wordsworth's "Prelude" and Keats's "To Autumn."... In those poems, nature is made to serve humans as a vehicle for or reflection of emotions. Hopkins makes himself the trees' mirror, by becoming the vehicle of nature's emotions. We feel the trees' passing as if bells knelled in a church where the poet-priest knelt. (Carson 163)

Both Carson and Day fail to acknowledge that Hopkins's is the only voice heard in the poem. Yes, Hopkins's own ideology allowed that humans could instress the inscape of any other living entity, but such is a sympathetic understanding that operates at the site of the human. When Carson claims that Hopkins has made himself a mirror for the trees' emotions, he assumes that the trees have emotions. Neither writer addresses the fact that, however compelling the poem is, it nevertheless represents a voice for nature, not a voice of nature.

And yet, this sense of proxy speaking and nature advocacy does not reveal any shortcoming on the part of the poet. Rather, investigating the poem through the understanding given by Cronon and Lewis, the careful reader will come to see a new perspective offered by Hopkins's poem. For Day, the crux of "Binsey Poplars" lies in Hopkins's use of the word "unselve" and the sentience that this lends to the trees, but acknowledging that any sentience in the poem comes directly from Hopkins through the construction of nature results in a substantially different reading. A more ecologically minded reading focuses on the relation between humans and nature, and that "even where we mean / To mend her we end her" (ll. 16–17). Hopkins begs the reader to consider whether humans can ever repair the damage they have done to the natural world. He speaks to contemporary readers by insisting they reflect on whether efforts to curb climate change and deforestation only push the earth more deeply into the Anthropocene.

Hopkins offers a solution within the poem that can be accessed by understanding the trees' otherness and considering Hopkins's scientific influences. Contrary to how Day and Carson have represented the poem, Hopkins speaks for the trees, and they remain distinctly other throughout the poem. To convey the sense of pain the trees feel (or that Hopkins presumes to know they feel), Hopkins compares the felling to removing a human's eyeball
Hopkins has no means to convey the pain of dis-branching or dis-leafing and, therefore, must rely on images of human dismemberment. This cuts against Day’s and Carson’s readings, which so heavily rely on Hopkins conveying the feelings of the trees. Furthermore, Hopkins genders the trees by referring to nature in the feminine when he says, “her being só slender” (l. 13), maintaining an otherness between Hopkins and the trees. Again, the poem itself suggests otherness in the midst of advocacy. Even as Hopkins seeks to reveal the inscape of the trees, he reveals his own sympathies reaching out for the trees.

But these sympathies are not any less potent than the previously perceived mirroring of nature’s feelings: the otherness of nature does not undermine Hopkins’s ecological efforts. On the contrary, the otherness inherent in the poem functions in tandem with scientific concepts and allows Hopkins to become nature’s proxy. The first image that Hopkins uses in the poem refers to the photosynthesis of the felled trees. He speaks of his “aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled, / Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun” (ll. 1–2). While some may read this “quelling” as simply the shade offered by the leaves, a more informed reading will illuminate Hopkins’s scientific understanding of his beloved trees. The principle of photosynthesis was well established by Hopkins’s time, having been explored by various Swiss and Austrian scientists in the late eighteenth century. Parham agrees with this photosynthetic reading, saying that the poem’s opening “immediately highlights a tension between preservationist sentiment and ecological science,” between Hopkins’s opposition to tree-felling and his scientific knowledge (“Green” 205). In this way, “Binsey Poplars” strongly represents a Victorian text worthy of ecocritical scrutiny. Clearly, Hopkins found inspiration in science, revealing his own interdisciplinarity that ecocriticism so heartily embraces. Jude Nixon explains that “Hopkins’s conversion to Roman Catholicism (1866) and Jesuit affiliation (1868) granted him membership in a religious community open to scientific inquiry” (132), a combination of traits found throughout Hopkins’s poetry. The mere presence of a poetic reference to photosynthesis may provide a substantial argument to the ecological and scientific motivations behind Hopkins’s writing, but this is not all the poem has to offer.

Continuing with themes informed by science, Hopkins uses concepts borrowed from thermodynamics to create a sense of order amidst the chaos of human destruction. Nixon opens his article on Hopkins’s thermodynamics by explaining that Hopkins’s “discourse reveals an attraction to the emerging...
science of thermodynamics, especially an anxiety with the second law” (131). The second law of thermodynamics is commonly referred to as the law of increasing entropy. The law details how in any system in which energy is expended, the amount of heat required to produce any effect—and the ensuing entropy, or disorder—will continually increase. Nineteenth-century scientists, and the environmentally minded writers of the era, began to fear the resultant “heat death” that would naturally stem from continually increasing entropy. This sense of spiraling perhaps influenced Yeats’s concept of gyres, but it certainly influenced Hopkins’s writing.

In “Binsey Poplars,” Hopkins uses repetition to convey this sense of growing disorder. The third line mourns the loss of the trees that are “All felled, felled, are all felled.” Hopkins echoes this deliberate repetition by alliterating the same sound in the line immediately following: “Of a fresh, and following folded rank” (l. 4). Hopkins has implemented this same technique in other poems. In “God’s Grandeur,” a far more widely evaluated poem, Hopkins declares that men “reck” the “rod” of God as their “[g]enerations have trod, have trod, have trod” (ll. 4–5). By increasing the use of particular words and sounds through repetition, Hopkins contributes to a sense of increasing entropy, a sense that by the end of “Binsey Poplars” takes its full and most poignant effect. The final three lines, those that describe what the “Strokes of havoc unselve” (l. 21), begin with a sense of disorder before finding a profound resolution.

The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene. (ll. 22–24)

Hopkins, in his mastery of poetic language and form, creates a sense of increasing disorder by describing the “sweet especial scene” and repeating the words “rural scene.” As in earlier moments of the poem, the repetition suggests the increasing entropy described in thermodynamics, but Hopkins does not leave the poem with that sense of imminent destruction. Instead, he organizes the disorder in the act of re-creating his feelings for the trees prior to their felling. Hopkins, as voice for nature, has conveyed his personal understanding of what he perceives their suffering to be; he has expressed the destruction that results from even the best intentions of humanity and has conveyed a sense of the effects of ever-increasing entropy. And then, Hopkins shows the power of the poet to choose to create meaning out of chaos, to find order amidst disorder, to somehow reverse the effects of entropy. Hopkins, in turn, has become the proxy
for nature, voicing “her” pains and discovering how humans can interact with nature through sympathetic projection.

The poem does include moments that provide conventional readings of nature. Hopkins mourns the loss of the trees, looking back on their “beauty” that “After-comers” cannot guess at (l. 19). He mentions the “Shadow” that these trees had offered to “meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank” (ll. 8–9). Such images reflect a common ecological lament: that deforestation or other alterations of nature remove beautiful places from the view of coming generations. Hopkins seems to lament the effect of tree-felling on not only human “After-comers” but also natural inhabitants of the forest, benefactors of the “Shadow.” These moments of Romantic elegy for destroyed nature are part of the scene that is set to stage the formal poetic experiments and scientific knowledge that becomes so apparent in the poem once ecocriticism has been allowed to cultivate. Hopkins does not rely on familiar tropes to convey his own ecological agenda. Rather, he uses such tropes, sentiments, and images to lay the foundation for his innovations. The poem thus uses the poet-ecologist’s right to become proxy for nature in order to convey perceptions of nature’s suffering (as opposed to nature’s actual suffering) and poetically to teach a poetic lesson regarding the formation of order in the face of thermodynamic terror.

Ecocritics need not rely on the Romantic ideal of finding texts that most nearly convey the voices of nature. Contemporary ecology means championing the causes of nature, actively seeking to use the means available to preserve beautiful places and conserving natural resources, standing as a proxy for nature that has no means of expressing its own distress. In light of climate change, the imminent entrance into the new geological epoch of the Anthropocene, the reef-shrивeling effects of ocean acidification, and other consequences of the overuse of fossil fuels, ecocritics can show the long heritage of environmentally aware literature. They can use texts from the Victorian era to show the importance of standing as proxies for nature while acknowledging that there can never be voices of nature. Ecocriticism may not be able to share all of the foundational goals of other approaches to literary criticism, but ecocriticism does represent an important exploration into how humankind interacts with the natural world.

Whether through an eco-conscious anthropocentric focus or through the more extreme biocentricity found in certain writers, ecocritics must arm themselves with the understanding that the meaning of nature has been constructed and that the process of choosing what nature teaches is a perfectly
acceptable means of interpretation. Hopkins is just one poet who chose to understand nature through a deep sympathy that governed a sensitivity for the natural world. Many other authors found inspiration not only from the natural world, but from the power of information and scientific exploration. The future of ecocriticism, specifically in regard to the Victorian era, rests in the hands of scholars who devote time and energy to researching the scientific advances of the era and how those advances impacted the literature and legislation of the period. All of these advances are most fully grasped when the constructs of nature are confronted and when ecocritics acknowledge the power of choosing to be proxies for the natural world.
Works Cited


